

Mini-dialogues as Warm-ups

By Hu Xiaoqiong

Usually, Chinese EFL students make satisfactory progress in reading, grammar, and writing, but when it comes to speaking, they often appear frustrated, less confident, or make fun of themselves. This is especially the case with those who are not English majors, for they are rarely exposed to oral English. Most teachers do not speak English in classes where traditional methods tend to predominate and where students' achievements in English are determined by their written exam scores.

To improve my students' communicative competence in my limited class hours, I developed mini-dialogues, which prove to be quite effective.

Preparation

For each class, two pairs of students are asked to prepare mini-dialogues. They are usually given one week to prepare, and have the freedom of talking about any subject. Their dialogues must be interesting, simple, have a theme, and be five minutes or less. They also are supposed to come to class prepared to write some new words from their dialogues on the blackboard.

Performance

After class begins, I usually take a few minutes to explain the new words before the first pair comes to the front and performs. Both must speak loudly, slowly, clearly, and in a natural manner. If possible, they are encouraged to use some simple objects. After they finish their talk, other students ask questions or I ask other students questions to see if they all have understood the dialogue. Then we listen to the second pair and follow the same procedure.

Teacher's comment

After the two pairs have finished their dialogues, I comment on their performances, always with a smile. I usually point out their strong points first, and praise them for their hard work. Then I correct their pronunciation, incorrect language usages, if any, and other weak points so that they do better next time.

Competition

In order to motivate my students to practice their oral English more in their spare time and speak better in class, the two pairs giving the mini-dialogues compete with each other, and the other students and I are the judges. Our rating is based on their pronunciation, intonation, fluency, language, manners, and length of time (about 5 minutes). The winning pair perform again in another competition with a new pair until they are defeated.

During the academic year, each pair of my students has about 12 opportunities to give mini-dialogues, and although each dialogue lasts only 5 minutes, students must prepare for hours.

Point system and award

I want to make sure every student, together with his/her partner, takes each activity seriously. If one pair does better than the other, the latter will lose one point. So if a pair wants to win, both partners must work together because one partner's successful performance directly influences the other. Those who win are given an extra half a point each time. In addition, at the end of the term, I reward the winning students with a gift.

At the end of the academic year, I asked them how the mini-dialogue activity benefited them. Their answers were unanimous.

1. The activity motivated them to speak more English after class, thereby improving their oral English skills.
2. It gave them opportunities to speak in front of an audience with confidence.
3. It helped them enlarge their vocabulary.
4. It gave them chances to learn from classmates.

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